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Le Couvert Blown: William Colby en Français

Finally, proof that
Frank Snepp was framed.

by Joseph Nocera

"We are trying, or I am trying, inside the Central Intelligence Agency...to educate our people on what the Publications Review Board does. I try to show them that we are there to help them, that we are a service-oriented board. We are not censors. Indeed, in [the regulations] Admiral Turner insisted that the one line be put in there that says approval will not be denied solely because the subject matter may be embarrassing to, or critical of, the agency. That was one of the refinements in the regulations, and it is assiduously followed. Mr. Peyton, our lawyer, keeps our feet to the fire...."

Herbert E. Hetu said that. You may never have heard of him, but Herb Hetu is one of Washington's most-quoted people. As the CIA's man in charge of public relations, it is he, more often than not, who is the anonymous CIA spokesman doling out a no-comment or an unattributable semi-clarification when reporters come calling. But that's not all Herb Hetu does for the CIA. He also serves as chairman of the Publications Review Board, which is charged with pre-screening all CIA-related manuscripts written by current and former employees, and it was while wearing this particular hat that he made that statement.

The date was March 6; Hetu was testifying before the House Select Committee on Intelligence. Three weeks earlier, the Supreme Court had handed down its

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extraordinary decision ruling that ex-CIA agent Frank Snepp had sinned mightily by publishing a book about the agency without first submitting it to Hetu's board for approval. During the court proceedings, the CIA had not argued its case on the basis that Snepp's book contained any classified information. It had contended simply that Snepp violated the so-called "secrecy agreement," a document all agents sign when they join the CIA, pledging to give their employer the right to review anything they might ever write about it. In ruling for the CIA, the Court agreed that this was a transgression so grievous that Snepp deserved to be soundly cuffed. So it stipulated that the CIA could go back to court to collect the \$200,000 or so that Snepp had earned in royalties from his book—leaving him penniless, or close to it.

Frank Snepp's *Decent Interval* had been published in January 1978 to general acclaim. It was a devastating inside account of the performance of the American government—and the CIA in particular—during the fall of South Vietnam. His conclusions did not make for light reading: he believed, for example, that thousands of Vietnamese who had faithfully served the American cause were coldbloodedly abandoned to an almost certain death because their American mentors didn't bother to destroy confidential employment files. Snepp was bitter about the CIA, but anyone who read his book knew he wasn't trying to destroy the agency—he was